

## Miguel Civil: An Appreciation

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Biographically speaking, the history of Sumerology in the twentieth century may be very briefly summarized as follows: before the Second World War, the dominant figures were the triad Anton Deimel with his *Šumerisches Lexikon*, François Thureau-Dangin with his *Les inscriptions de Sumer et d'Akkad*, and Arno Poebel with his *Grundzüge der sumerischen Grammatik*. After the Second World War, it was the triad Adam Falkenstein, Thorkild Jacobsen, and myself who became the most influential figures: Falkenstein with his grammatical studies and translations of Sumerian legal and literary texts; Jacobsen with his imaginative historical, mythological, and grammatical studies; and Kramer with his role in the reconstruction of many of the Sumerian literary compositions. Moreover, it was these three scholars who may be said to have generated and produced the next, post-war generation of Sumerologists, of which Miguel Civil is one of the best representatives. Miguel was a Research Associate in the University Museum for four years, and I had the opportunity and privilege to follow closely and intimately his first footsteps on the Sumerological path and to observe and appreciate his numerous special gifts, skills, and talents that have made him a leading Sumerologist of our time. This circumstance, though quite accidental and incidental, is not without relevance for understanding the direction and development of his extraordinary scholarly career.

Miguel came to Philadelphia and the University Museum in the fall of 1958: fresh, eager, enthusiastic, aspiring, and (surprisingly) self-confident. The last characteristic stands out in my mind, for while his knowledge of Sumerian, though impressive, was far from perfect at that time, as France, where he had spent some of his student years, was not noted for its Sumerological possibilities and achievements in the fifties and sixties. However, as the weeks and months went by, it became clear to me that Miguel was endowed with numerous gifts and talents, particularly those that are extremely helpful in reconstructing Sumerian literary texts – my main Sumerological concern – but which I lacked to a great extent. He had a sharp eye and a photographic memory which are invaluable for that task: the piecing together of literary compositions from numerous tablets and fragments, published and unpublished, scattered in museums the world over, but mostly housed in the University Museum and the Istanbul Museum of Archaeology. In the course of time, Miguel became a master at identifying many of these fragments, making “joins” whenever possible, and assigning them to the right compositions. Over the years, long after he had left the University Museum for the Oriental Institute, Miguel continued this exceedingly important activity in one way or another, and this has led him to compile the detailed all-inclusive “Catalogue of Sumerian

Literature”, which, to cite *The 1989 Annual Report of the Oriental Institute*, he is now converting to electronic format. Although this “Catalogue” is, to large extent, the result of random, unplanned cooperation of a host of scholars, it was Miguel who collected the scattered relevant data and organized them into this indispensable Sumerological tool.

Another of Miguel’s gifts and predilections, I soon realized, related to the “material” and technological aspects of Sumerian culture, an area of research that still remains a virgin soil in many respects, since most Sumerologists, myself included, tend to avoid and neglect it. But Miguel, with his special flair and talent for matters technological, found it interesting and attractive. This is evident already in his very first publications, some of which he began and completed in the University Museum: for example, his valuable edition of the unique composition “The Home of the Fish”, published in 1961, which contains a great number of names of fish and birds that had to be zoologically identified; or his innovative edition of a hymn to the beer goddess Ninkasi, which he published in 1964, but whose text he had already pieced together in 1961 in the University Museum; or his masterful edition of the unique Ur III medical tablet from Nippur with its large number of medical terms and technical details (“Prescriptions médicales sumériennes”).

One of the most significant contributions to Sumerian scholarship is Miguel’s superb dissertation for the Collège de France (1965), which treats the “Debate between the Hoe and the Plow”. It illustrates vividly his interest and expertise in agricultural implements and techniques, as well as the importance of lexical, economic, and literary sources in clarifying them. This composition is one of some eight “debates” or *tensons* that Miguel began to reconstruct and study in the University Museum, and whose texts, reconstructed from scores of tablets and fragments, he has now prepared for the *Philadelphia Sumerian Dictionary*. One awaits eagerly his planned edition of all the “debates”, for these compositions reveal much about Sumerian ordinary people and their daily life, an aspect of culture in which both he and I are deeply interested.

One extraordinary document relating to agriculture that is not a “debate” is the “Manuel d’agriculture”, also known as the “Farmer’s Almanach” or the “Sumerian Georgica”. Miguel had begun an intensive study of this document while still in the University Museum, and subsequently discussed it in some detail in his dissertation. It is my understanding that he is about to publish a comprehensive, thoroughgoing edition of this composition, one that will no doubt illuminate much that is unknown and unclear about ancient agricultural practices and techniques.

Finally, turning to Sumerian lexicography, the field in which Miguel is now the unchallenged master, it is not irrelevant to note that even his earliest publications demonstrate an affinity for, and attraction to, lexicographical problems and details, and that as early as 1960 he had pieced together a lexical text from some twenty fragments in the University Museum, virtually all unpublished, for an article entitled “Additional Material for the Reconstruction of the Series Proto-Lu” (unpublished), all of which foreshadowed to some extent his later lexicographical contributions.

The breadth and depth of Miguel’s ideas, insights, and reflections on matters lexicographical are revealed in his article “Lexicography”, published in 1975 in the *Jacobsen Festschrift*, a *tour de force* whose contents, historical and substantive, are of fundamental importance for future lexicographical study and practice. One may differ with him on his (largely utopian, in my view) depiction of what a Sumerian dictionary should look like – the time is hardly ripe for the ideal dictionary he envisages, and at least for the next generation or two, one will have to make do with a less perfect lexicographical tool – but this should not deter Sumerian lexicographers from doing their knowing and imaginative best. An example of what can be accomplished has recently been given by Miguel in his valuable and stimulating study “Sumerian Riddles: A Corpus” (1987).

And what of the future? As his more recent contributions, including the “Riddles” article just cited, demonstrate, Miguel is now, Sumerologically speaking, at the peak of his scholarly powers. Moreover, as

the aforementioned *1989 Annual Report of the Oriental Institute* indicates, he is at present preparing a pilot computerized edition of several HAR-ra = *hubullu* tablets; he is working on the reconstruction of some very early lexical lists from Fara, Abu Salabikh, and Ebla; and he is planning to work with a Spanish archaeological expedition to Syria, where he also intends to verify the "uncountable joins" among Emar tablets that he has proposed in a recent article, as well to collate some lexical texts from Ebla. In short, the young Catalanian who began studies in Paris, and then came to Philadelphia: fresh, eager, enthusiastic, aspiring, and (surprisingly) self-confident, has become one of the world's most outstanding Sumerologists: original, innovative, creative, extraordinarily productive, and (justifiably) self-confident.